

7 March 2021 (Mark 7:1 – 8:21)

Selected verses from Psalm 15

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,

and speak the truth from their heart;

who do not slander with their tongue,

and do no evil to their friends,

nor take up a reproach against their neighbours;

who do not lend money at interest,

and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Bible reading from Mark 7:1 – 8:21 (based on Contemporary English Version)

Some Pharisees and several teachers of the Law from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. They noticed that some of his disciples ate without first washing their hands. You see, the Pharisees do not eat unless they wash their hands in the proper way, nor eat anything from the market unless they wash it first. They asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples follow the teaching handed down by our ancestors?”



Jesus replied: The prophet Isaiah was right about you when he wrote:

“These people honour me with their words but really they are hypocrites.

They worship me by following human made-up rules.”

Jesus called the crowd together and said, “The food that you put into your mouth doesn’t make you unclean and unfit to worship God.

What makes you unclean are the bad words that come out of your heart. It’s from there come evil thoughts – stealing, murder, greed, envy, pride and foolishness. These are the things that make you unfit to worship God.”

Jesus left and went to the coastal region near the city of Tyre. He didn't want people to know he was there, but he couldn't stay hidden for long. A woman, whose daughter had an evil spirit in her, heard where Jesus was and she came and knelt down before him. The woman was a Gentile, born in Syria.

She begged Jesus to heal her daughter. But Jesus said, "Let's feed the children first. It isn't right to take their food and feed it to dogs."

The woman replied, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's left-overs."

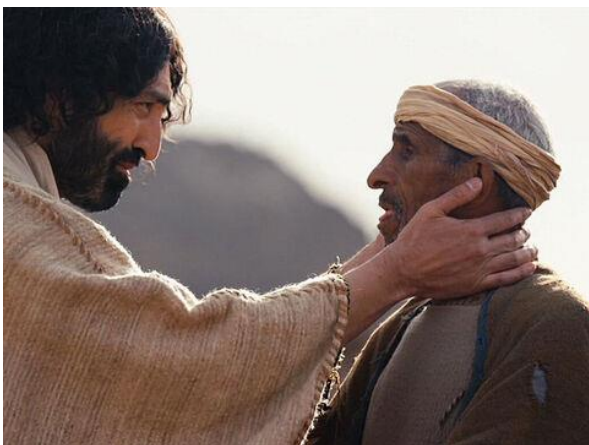
Jesus answered, "That's true! You may go now.

The evil spirit has left your daughter." When

the woman got back home, she found her child lying peacefully on the bed with the evil spirit gone.



Jesus left the coastal region and started back towards Galilee. As he went through this



Gentile territory, some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. They begged Jesus just to heal him. Jesus took him aside from the crowd, and stuck his fingers in the man's ears. Then he spat and put it on the man's tongue. Jesus looked up to heaven, and with a groan he said, "Effatha!" which means "Open up!" At once the man could hear, and he could talk clearly. All who heard about it were

amazed, "He even heals people who cannot hear or talk."

Another large crowd gathered around Jesus. They had not brought along anything to eat. So Jesus called his disciples to him "I feel sorry for these people for they don't have anything to eat." The disciples said, "Where in this desert can we possibly find enough food to feed such a crowd?" Jesus asked "How much food do you have?" "Seven loaves and a few fish" was the answer.

Jesus told the crowd to sit down, then took the seven loaves and blessed them, broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the crowd. The crowd of about four thousand people ate all they wanted, and the leftovers filled seven large baskets.

Some Pharisees came up to Jesus and started to argue with him. They wanted to trap him by asking him to perform a miracle in their sight. Jesus sighed deeply but refused

to offer them a sign. Jesus left them, got into a boat and started crossing over to the other side of the lake. The disciples, meanwhile, had only taken one loaf of bread with them. Jesus warned them to be on their guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod and so they started talking about what Jesus meant: “He must be saying this because we don’t have any bread.”



Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you talking about not having any bread? Don’t you understand? Are your eyes blind and your ears deaf? Don’t you remember how many baskets of leftovers you picked up when I fed those five thousand people with only five small loaves of bread?”

“Twelve” they answered.

“And how many baskets did you pick up when I broke the seven loaves for those four thousand people?”

“Seven,” they answered.

“And you *still* don’t understand?”

MESSAGE – Who is acceptable to God?

During the Covid pandemic, the public health benefits of good hygiene have been drummed into us – cough into your elbow or a tissue, wash or sanitise your hands often, wear a mask indoors.

With these rules in mind, let's listen in to the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about hygiene:



- Your disciples don't wash their hands properly before eating and are therefore unclean in the sight of God
 - You are hypocrites for following human rules about hand washing but ignoring the heart qualities that God desires in a person
- So are the Pharisees right – is cleanliness next to godliness?

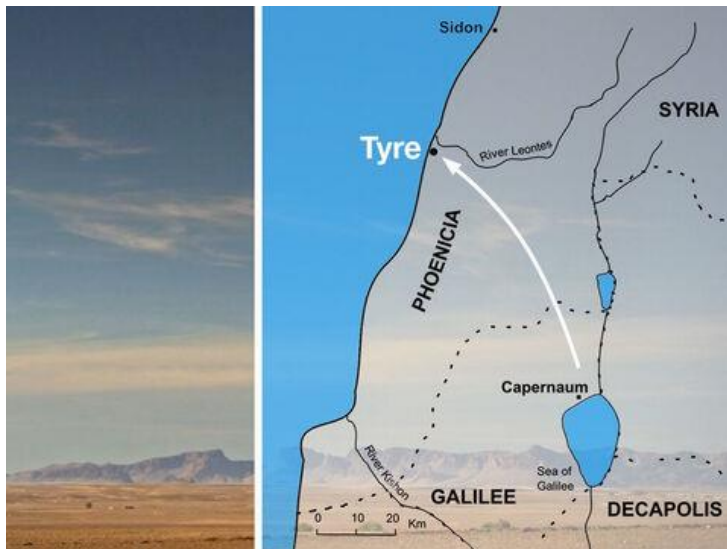
This is a valid question to ask in these days of Covid – especially if we consider how to be a good neighbour – but it may distract us from what is central according to Jesus. The bigger question that Jesus was constantly challenging people with was '**Who is acceptable to God?**' And Jesus' answer was very different to that of the Pharisees.

For the Pharisees a person must follow certain rules to be acceptable to God – rules about what foods to eat, who you might share a meal with, how to wash your hands properly. In various eras of our history we Christians have applied similar rules – no dancing, no drinking of alcohol, no work or sport on Sundays, compulsory attendance at Communion if you want to be a good Christian.

Jesus reframes the whole discussion. What makes a person acceptable to God are our **inner** attitudes and **character** – what's in our **heart** that motivates our **actions**. What makes a person unclean is the type of thinking that leads to greed or stealing or envy or murder – or in the recent news – the thoughts of some men that women are freely available to satisfy their sexual desires anywhere, anytime. Jesus demonstrates a very different heart attitude that offers forgiveness, restoration and compassion to people in need. It's these heart attitudes that make a person acceptable to God.

What other themes emerge in this week's reading? One of them is about **geography**.

Last week, we saw how Jesus extended his ministry through the disciples as he sent them out in pairs to engage in similar ministry to himself – teaching about God’s kingdom and healing people. This week we see Jesus extending his ministry in another way – **by choosing to travel through Gentile territory** – that is non-Jewish areas of Palestine.



Today’s action occurs in the coastal region near Tyre and then in Decapolis to the south and east of Galilee. Next week there will be a major change of direction – both in Mark’s story and in the geography.

The content of this week’s episodes is familiar to us by now. We see Jesus teaching, casting out an evil spirit, healing and feeding a large crowd. The

difference this week is the **recipients** of this ministry.

Jesus travels to Tyre on the Mediterranean coast and hopes to remain incognito, away from the crowds who follow his every move. No such luck. He’s been there just a short time when a woman searches him out and begs him to help her daughter who is afflicted by an unclean spirit. This unnamed woman has no social rights to even be talking with Jesus, a Jewish male. Jesus seems to resent the intrusion and suggests that his focus is with the **children** – the **chosen Jewish people** – and not with **dogs** – unclean Gentile people like the woman. But the woman is quick witted and points out that even dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the children’s table. Her faith and perseverance win Jesus over and he grants her request – her daughter is healed of her affliction.



Jesus learns an important lesson through the encounter too. **Gentiles** like this woman and her daughter are **equally acceptable to God** as Jewish people are.



Still in Gentile territory, Jesus is approached by friends of a deaf and mute man. Jesus takes him aside, touches his ears and tongue and the man is healed. As previously, those who know the man are amazed at what Jesus does. I wonder if the disciples recalled the words from Isaiah the prophet that when God comes and reveals his glory, the ears of the deaf will hear and the tongue of the mute shall sing for

joy?

Then we have another familiar sounding story. Jesus has attracted a large crowd who have presumably gathered to hear him teach and heal. They are hungry and have no food. There is a familiar conversation between Jesus and the disciples:

- *How could you feed so many people out here in the desert?*
- *How many loaves of bread do you have?*
- *Not enough Jesus. Just seven loaves.*

No problem ... Jesus takes the loaves, blesses them, breaks them into pieces and the disciples feed the 4000 people there before Jesus departs. There are seven baskets of food left over. Again, a little has become abundance in the hands of Jesus and everyone is fed with leftovers aplenty.



We're nearing the end of Act 1 in Mark's Gospel.

We've seen Jesus at work teaching and healing and we've been introduced to various other characters.



The **Pharisees** are the chief antagonists who are opposed to every move of Jesus. The **disciples** are the insiders with privileged access to Jesus. Before the curtain falls on Act 1 each of these groups has one more scene ...

First it's the turn of the **Pharisees**, who come to argue with Jesus and try to trap him. Their opposition to Jesus has been present since

chapter 3 of the story when Jesus ignored the Sabbath day rules and healed a man in the synagogue. Show us a sign they demand. Perform some miracle or act of power in

our presence so that we can know that you really are from God and not just a **false prophet** who keeps breaking all our rules. This line of attack will continue right up to the cross.

Mark tells us that Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit. He ignores their demand and leaves. Given all that Jesus has been doing, the Pharisees remain stubbornly blind. They see Jesus as **ungodly** and a very real **threat** to their brand of faith.

Then there is an exchange between Jesus and the **disciples**, who, once again it seems, don't have enough bread for their immediate needs. Jesus warns them about the yeast of the Pharisees and King Herod and they draw a connection between this mention of figurative yeast and their lack of physical bread.



I imagine Jesus sighing deeply again.

Do you still not understand? Are you as dense as the crowds back in chapter 4 that I described as always looking but not seeing and listening but not hearing? After being with me on the road for months and having heard me teach, seen me heal and feed people, and heard what the unclean spirits say about me, are you blind and deaf to who I really am?

You saw me feed a crowd of 5000 using 5 loaves ... with 12 baskets left over

You've just seen me feed a crowd of 4000 ... with 7 baskets left over

If I am the one through whom God is working to provide such abundant hospitality and the one pointing people every day to the reality of the kingdom of God, why are you preoccupied about having a single loaf of bread?

Open your eyes and see the bigger picture!

Don't think like the Pharisees who want to restrict God's generosity and compassion to just a few people who follow the rules.

And don't think like Herod who is cruel and violent and wields power only for his own personal gain.

If you haven't grasped this yet, how will you cope with what lies ahead?

Remember that Mark's Gospel is based on the preaching of Peter, the usual spokesperson of the disciples. He is effectively telling us that up this point in the ministry of Jesus, the disciples were really struggling to understand who Jesus was.

So perhaps we need to give ourselves a little more **space** and **grace** when we are faced

with our own **confusion** and **doubts** about Jesus. If his identity was not clear to the disciples who lived with him day in day out, then it won't always be clear to us. It's okay to think sometimes that I really don't get Jesus and what he might be calling us to do.

On the other hand, though, we have the benefit and privilege of having multiple eyewitness accounts of the life and death of Jesus, we have the reflections of Paul and other NT writers and the experience of Christians down through the ages as well as our many peers, who have all grappled with who Jesus is and how we might best follow him. Each of us is called to make our own response of faith.

So what might we learn from today's reading?

We might remember who is **acceptable** to God ... and the amazing truth that every person is acceptable ...

both women and men ...

both Jews and Gentiles ...

both sick and well people ...

those with clean hearts ...

and, yes, even the frustrating disciples who – like us – seem so slow to understand.